The Societal Drill: Cultural Rehearsal, Psychological Operations, and the Preconditioning of Future Reality

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Abstract

Societies often rehearse the future before they encounter it. Sometimes the rehearsal is explicit: military exercises, civil-defense drills, evacuation procedures, pandemic simulations, emergency broadcasts, and disaster-response exercises are intentionally performed before the conditions they anticipate become real. But rehearsal can also occur less visibly through education, bureaucracy, news, entertainment, political rhetoric, advertising, games, and repeated cultural representations of threat, authority, sacrifice, crisis, and social order. The phrase *societal drill* has occasionally been used for population-scale exercises and metaphorically for systems of social conditioning, but it is not an established sociological category.

This paper develops *societal drill* as a general analytical concept. A societal drill is a repeated social, behavioral, institutional, or representational process through which a population becomes practiced in particular ways of perceiving, feeling, judging, or acting before those patterns become materially consequential. Its defining feature is rehearsal rather than persuasion. A society may become familiar with a future condition without approving it, expecting it, or even consciously recognizing that preparation has occurred.

The concept overlaps with socialization, disciplinary power, habitus, propaganda, strategic communication, and psychological operations, but it is reducible to none of them. Most importantly, intentionality is not required. Some societal drills are deliberately organized. Others emerge from cultural repetition, market incentives, institutional routine, and technological systems. Psychological operations represent an intentional limiting case rather than the definition of the phenomenon.

The central proposition is simple: **before societies live through possible futures, they may already have practiced ways of inhabiting them.**

1. Society Rehearses

A fire drill works because repetition changes what happens later. The alarm is sounded when there is no fire so that, if a real fire occurs, people do not encounter the situation entirely without preparation. Military drill operates according to the same principle. Actions practiced

repeatedly become easier to perform under pressure. Emergency exercises, disaster simulations, and civil-defense programs scale this principle upward from individuals to organizations and populations.

A societal drill begins with this familiar structure but extends it beyond physical behavior. Societies do not rehearse only evacuation routes, battlefield maneuvers, or emergency procedures. They also repeatedly encounter representations of enemies, heroes, authority, technological control, sacrifice, catastrophe, intervention, surveillance, social disorder, and rescue. These encounters may occur through news, entertainment, schools, political rituals, institutional procedures, and now algorithmically selected media.

The result is not necessarily belief. Repetition may instead produce familiarity.

This distinction is essential. A population does not have to support a possible future in order to become practiced in recognizing it. Dystopian fiction can make authoritarian surveillance culturally familiar while condemning it. War films can make military command, weapons, sacrifice, and combat intelligible while portraying war as tragic. Disaster fiction can familiarize audiences with emergency government without advocating emergency rule. Rehearsal precedes the question of approval.

The concept can therefore be stated in compact form:

repetition → familiarity → recognition → available response

The sequence is not deterministic. People remain capable of resistance, reinterpretation, surprise, and contradiction. But a previously rehearsed situation differs from one that is genuinely unimaginable. Culture supplies scripts, analogies, emotional associations, and categories through which later events can be understood.

A society entering a crisis does not enter it empty.

It brings stories.

It brings habits.

It brings images.

It brings memories.

It brings expectations about who should command, who should obey, what danger looks like, which institutions are legitimate, and what kinds of sacrifice are reasonable.

That prior repertoire is the subject of this paper.

2. From Socialization to Rehearsal

Several established traditions already describe important parts of this process. Foucault examined how institutions train bodies and behavior through schedules, surveillance, classification, repetition, and discipline. Bourdieu described habitus as the durable set of dispositions acquired through repeated participation in social life. Weber analyzed the rationalization of modern life through bureaucracy, procedure, calculation, and institutional routine. Althusser emphasized the role of institutions in reproducing social roles and ideological structures. These ideas overlap strongly with the broader notion of repeated social conditioning.
The societal drill adds a temporal emphasis. It asks not only how people are shaped by institutions, but what later situations that shaping prepares them to enter.

A school teaches mathematics and language, but it also teaches punctuality, schedules, evaluation, rank, permission, credentialing, and performance under observation. A bureaucracy teaches people to accept forms, numbers, classifications, queues, identification, and procedural authority. A workplace teaches hierarchy, metrics, deadlines, and institutional accountability. None of these practices is necessarily sinister. Most are required for large-scale coordination. But repeated participation builds a repertoire.

Under new conditions, that repertoire can be transferred.

A population already accustomed to identification systems will experience a new identification system differently from one for whom formal identity verification is unfamiliar. A population accustomed to emergency alerts possesses an interpretive framework when a new alert arrives. A population accustomed to institutional ranking understands the logic of classification before any particular classification is imposed.

Ordinary socialization can therefore become preparation for extraordinary conditions without having been designed for that purpose.

This is one reason intent must be separated from effect.

A society can condition itself.

3. The Drill Without a Drillmaster

The word *drill* naturally suggests someone conducting it. Fire drills have organizers. Military drills have commanders. Emergency exercises have planners. If the concept of societal drill required the same structure, it would apply only to deliberate programs.

That would miss much of the phenomenon.

Complex societies generate patterned behavior without central direction. Filmmakers imitate successful genres. News organizations repeat formats that attract audiences. Politicians reuse effective narratives. Schools inherit institutional routines. Corporations adopt practices used by other corporations. Social-media systems amplify material that produces engagement. Audiences themselves select which stories are rewarded and repeated.

The resulting pattern may be highly regular without being centrally coordinated.

This distinction is fundamental because otherwise every effect of repetition becomes evidence of hidden intention. Cultural convergence becomes conspiracy. Institutional inertia becomes strategy. Commercial incentives become covert planning.

A useful theory of societal drill must reject that shortcut.

The proper order of inquiry is:

What is being rehearsed?

Then:

How is the repetition produced?

And only then:

Who, if anyone, intended the effect?

Sometimes there will be a clear organizer. Sometimes several institutions will have overlapping interests. Sometimes a pattern will arise largely from decentralized incentives. The concept should accommodate all three.

4. Psychological Operations as the Intentional Case

Psychological operations represent the clearest deliberate form of societal drill. Here an actor intentionally seeks to affect the perceptions, emotions, decisions, or behavior of a target population. In this context, repeated exercises or communications may be used to test reactions, reduce resistance, prime threat perception, encourage conformity, or make particular responses easier to evoke.

The source discussion identifies several possible mechanisms: measuring compliance and resistance, reducing shock through repeated exposure, priming perceptions of threat, and encouraging social enforcement through peer pressure. These mechanisms are useful as hypotheses, but they require evidence when applied to real events.

The distinction between societal drill and PSYOP should therefore remain strict:

Every PSYOP societal drill is a societal drill, but not every societal drill is a PSYOP.

A cultural product can normalize a military vocabulary without being commissioned by the military. An emergency exercise can familiarize citizens with command structures without secretly existing for that purpose. A media environment can amplify fear because fear captures attention rather than because a government designed a fear campaign.

Intentionality must be demonstrated.

This is not merely a methodological precaution. It is what makes the concept useful. If every instance of cultural conditioning is called a PSYOP, the term becomes too broad to explain anything. By keeping rehearsal separate from authorship, we can examine effects first and attribution second.

5. Star Trek, Vietnam, and Cultural Rehearsal

The relationship between fictional rehearsal and real history becomes particularly interesting when the same cultural period contains both an ongoing war and popular stories about distant conflict, intervention, command, sacrifice, and technological power.

Star Trek aired during the Vietnam War. Its fictional universe was not Vietnam, and the series cannot reasonably be reduced to a simple pro-war message. It often questioned militarism, prejudice, authoritarianism, and intervention. Yet its characters repeatedly operated within a disciplined command hierarchy, encountered distant conflicts, confronted rival powers, debated intervention, and made decisions in which technologically superior actors faced morally complicated societies.

This is precisely why it is useful.

The question is not whether *Star Trek* secretly prepared boys to fight in Vietnam.

The stronger question is whether television could provide a repeated environment in which young viewers practiced thinking about command, sacrifice, enemies, intervention, duty, technological superiority, and geopolitical conflict before some of those viewers encountered related questions in adult life.

One episode makes the overlap unusually visible. “A Private Little War,” broadcast in 1968, centers on a conflict in which one side has been supplied with advanced weapons and Captain Kirk considers arming the opposing side to restore a balance of power. The parallel with contemporary proxy-war logic is difficult to miss.

The important point is not that the episode dictated a conclusion.

It rehearsed a dilemma.

A viewer could support Kirk's reasoning, reject it, or remain conflicted. But the strategic structure had become narratively available. A problem resembling real geopolitical intervention had already been encountered in symbolic form.

This suggests one of the most useful formulations of societal drill:

culture does not always rehearse answers; sometimes it rehearses questions.

The audience learns what kinds of conflicts exist, what categories matter, and what decisions powerful actors are expected to consider.

The Tet Offensive provides a striking historical counterpoint. In 1968, American television audiences encountered radically different representations of conflict almost simultaneously: fictional command decisions aboard the Enterprise and graphic news of urban warfare, casualties, destruction, uncertainty, and political crisis in Vietnam. Fiction and reality did not merge, but they occupied the same cultural field.

One offered the controlled space of narrative.

The other delivered historical contingency.

Together they illustrate the tension at the heart of societal rehearsal: stories provide scripts, but reality does not necessarily obey them.

6. From Spectator to Participant

Television and film ask audiences to watch. Games ask them to act.

This changes the structure of rehearsal.

In a military film, the viewer observes a mission. In a game, the player receives objectives, navigates environments, identifies threats, makes tactical choices, repeats failed attempts, and learns procedures through performance. The source discussion notes this shift in relation to modern first-person military games, where warfare and surveillance become repeated interactive activities rather than merely images on a screen.

This should not be confused with actual military training. The difference between simulated entertainment and real combat is enormous. But the cultural form is nevertheless significant. Millions of people now spend substantial amounts of time operating inside simulated worlds that require them to learn rules, maps, interfaces, threats, and objectives.

The societal drill has become participatory.

Virtual and augmented reality may extend this further. Increasingly realistic simulations can create environments in which fictional, educational, occupational, and strategic rehearsal

overlap. The distinction between entertainment and training may become less obvious in some domains, particularly when the same simulation technologies serve both.

The deeper point is not about any one game.

It is that modern culture has moved from repeated representation toward repeated performance.

7. The Algorithmic Societal Drill

The transition from broadcast media to algorithmic media creates an even greater change.

Traditional television repeated broadly similar material to large audiences. Algorithmic systems can repeat material selectively, observing what each individual watches, pauses over, shares, rejects, or returns to. Repetition becomes adaptive.

A person who responds strongly to stories about crime may receive more crime. A user interested in political corruption may receive a growing stream of corruption narratives. Someone captivated by artificial intelligence may encounter increasingly dramatic versions of technological transformation. Fear, anger, hope, suspicion, catastrophe, and triumph can all become self-reinforcing themes.

No central propagandist is necessary.

The system may simply optimize engagement.

Yet the effect can resemble individualized rehearsal. The user repeatedly practices recognizing one class of threat, one model of political conflict, one technological future, or one moral interpretation of events.

Different people can therefore inhabit different societal drills.

One repeatedly rehearses civilizational collapse.

Another rehearses authoritarian takeover.

Another technological utopia.

Another environmental catastrophe.

Another war.

Another revolution.

The result may be populations occupying the same physical society while becoming practiced in radically different anticipated futures.

This is a qualitative change from twentieth-century mass media.

The broadcast era asked millions of people to watch the same rehearsal.

The algorithmic era can give each person a different one.

8. Emotional Rehearsal

A societal drill does not prepare only actions and interpretations. It can also prepare emotions.

Fear can be rehearsed. So can suspicion, admiration, disgust, resignation, hope, and outrage. Repeated exposure to a class of threat can make fear easier to activate. Repeated depictions of heroic authority can make trust or admiration more readily available. Constant stories of betrayal can cultivate anticipatory suspicion. Repeated catastrophe can produce vigilance, exhaustion, or numbness.

This matters because political and social behavior is not generated by abstract reasoning alone. People respond through affective frameworks. A society may therefore become practiced not merely in what to think about a future, but in how to feel when that future appears.

The distinction is important. Persuasion seeks agreement. Emotional rehearsal may operate before agreement. A person can reject a message intellectually while still acquiring an association through repetition.

That is one reason cultural influence can be difficult to measure. Opinion may remain unchanged while emotional readiness shifts.

9. Rehearsing Authority

One of the most consequential things a society can practice is its relationship to authority.

Under ordinary conditions, most people do not spend much time thinking about emergency chains of command, evacuation orders, rationing, quarantine, mobilization, or restrictions on movement. Under crisis conditions, these questions become immediate.

Preparedness exercises exist partly to remove uncertainty. They establish who issues instructions, which institutions coordinate, where people go, and what procedures are followed. In that sense they rehearse authority as much as behavior.

The same can occur symbolically.

Fiction repeatedly stages situations in which institutions fail or succeed. It shows scientists, military officers, politicians, police, corporations, machines, rebels, or ordinary citizens taking command. These stories implicitly rehearse competing models of legitimacy.

Who should act when normal systems fail?

Who should be trusted?

Who should be obeyed?

Who has the right to suspend ordinary rules?

Stories answer these questions again and again, even when they are not written as political arguments.

By the time a real crisis arrives, a population may already possess several competing scripts for legitimate authority.

10. Preparedness and Conditioning

The distinction between preparedness and conditioning is not always sharp.

A large-scale emergency exercise can have many functions at once. It can improve coordination, expose weaknesses, train institutions, reassure the public, demonstrate competence, signal readiness to adversaries, and familiarize citizens with procedures. The source discussion explicitly distinguishes between inward-facing effects on the domestic population and outward-facing signaling to foreign observers.

These functions do not necessarily conflict.

A drill can genuinely improve readiness while also shaping expectations.

A military exercise can train forces while also signaling resolve.

A public-health simulation can improve logistics while also teaching the public what emergency authority looks like.

The presence of a symbolic effect does not invalidate the practical purpose.

This is another reason the societal-drill concept is useful. It allows one event to have several effects without forcing a choice between “real preparedness” and “psychological operation.”

The relevant question is not whether the exercise had one hidden purpose.

It is what forms of rehearsal it produced.

11. Counter-Drills

Societies do not rehearse only obedience.

They also rehearse resistance.

Dystopian fiction can teach suspicion of centralized power. Protest movements rehearse collective action. Civil-rights organizations rehearse disciplined nonviolence. Courts rehearse

limits on authority. Journalism rehearses skepticism. Scientific institutions rehearse demands for evidence. Satire rehearses irreverence toward power.

These are societal drills too.

The concept therefore cannot be identified with control.

Some rehearsals prepare populations to accept authority.

Others prepare them to challenge it.

Some rehearse sacrifice.

Others rehearse refusal.

Some normalize intervention.

Others normalize dissent.

A society is therefore not governed by one drill. It contains competing drills, often operating simultaneously.

The political question becomes: which rehearsals are culturally dominant at a particular moment, and which become available when reality changes?

12. The Problem of Retrospective Pattern Matching

The greatest danger in using the concept is overinterpretation.

Once a later event occurs, earlier stories and simulations can suddenly appear prophetic. A film resembles a war. A fictional virus resembles a pandemic. A technological story resembles a later invention. A crisis exercise resembles a later emergency.

These resemblances can be striking.

They are not, by themselves, evidence of preparation.

Modern societies generate enormous amounts of fiction, scenario planning, simulation, forecasting, journalism, and speculative thought. Some of it will inevitably resemble later events.

A rigorous societal-drill analysis must therefore avoid reasoning backward from resemblance to intent.

The correct question is not:

“Did this earlier representation predict the event?”

It is:

“Did repeated exposure to this kind of representation alter how later events were recognized, interpreted, or acted upon?”

That is a much stronger question because it can be investigated.

13. Toward a Testable Concept

If societal drill is to be more than a metaphor, it must generate claims that can fail.

Several elements are potentially measurable: frequency of exposure, similarity between rehearsal and later conditions, emotional intensity, degree of participation, persistence over time, and transfer from representation to behavior.

The most important distinction is between familiarity and approval.

A person may become highly familiar with surveillance while becoming more opposed to it. A viewer may understand military intervention better while becoming less supportive of war. A population may become more competent at emergency procedures without becoming more accepting of emergency power.

A research program should therefore measure these separately.

Did exposure increase recognition?

Did it increase perceived plausibility?

Did it change emotional response?

Did it alter moral judgment?

Did it affect willingness to comply?

Did it improve performance?

These are different outcomes.

The theory predicts only that repeated rehearsal should make some possibilities easier to recognize, imagine, or enact than possibilities never encountered at all.

The direction of the moral or political effect remains open.

14. Intent and Evidence

Intent is the hardest part of the analysis.

Some societal drills are obviously deliberate. Fire drills are planned. Military exercises are planned. Recruitment campaigns are planned. Psychological operations, by definition, involve intentional influence.

Other cases are ambiguous.

A television series may produce a rehearsal effect its creators never intended. A social-media platform may amplify fear because fear retains attention. A film studio may collaborate with military institutions for access and realism rather than ideological influence. A government may participate in media production for public-relations purposes without designing the entire cultural effect that follows.

Intent therefore requires evidence.

Documents matter.

Funding matters.

Institutional relationships matter.

Directives matter.

Statements of purpose matter.

Internal evaluations matter.

Without such evidence, the safest category is cultural rehearsal rather than PSYOP.

This distinction strengthens rather than weakens the argument.

The most interesting possibility may be that societies regularly produce psychologically preparatory effects without anyone controlling the whole system.

Conditioning can occur without a conditioner.

15. Before the Future Arrives

Human beings live partly in realities that do not yet exist.

We imagine wars before fighting them.

We imagine technologies before building them.

We imagine disasters before surviving them.

We imagine governments, machines, revolutions, pandemics, collapses, and transformations.

These imagined worlds do not remain sealed inside fiction.

They become part of the cognitive environment through which later events are understood.

Culture is therefore not only memory.

It is rehearsal.

Some rehearsals are warnings.

Some are fantasies.

Some are entertainment.

Some are practical exercises.

Some are propaganda.

Some are psychological operations.

Most are mixtures.

The societal drill offers a way to study them without assuming that every representation is manipulation and without pretending that repetition is neutral.

Its central insight is simple:

before societies live through futures, they often practice ways of inhabiting them.

Sometimes they know they are practicing.

Sometimes someone deliberately leads the exercise.

Sometimes no one does.

And sometimes the rehearsal only becomes visible when reality begins to resemble it.

Conclusion

The idea of the societal drill begins with an ordinary fact: practice changes later behavior.

The larger claim is that societies practice symbolically as well as physically. Institutions, stories, entertainment, news, games, simulations, and algorithmic systems repeatedly expose populations to models of threat, authority, sacrifice, intervention, surveillance, crisis, and technological change.

These repetitions do not necessarily persuade. They may instead create familiarity.

That familiarity matters because future events never arrive in culturally empty space.

They arrive in populations that have already imagined parts of them.

Psychological operations occupy one intentional end of the spectrum, but the broader phenomenon does not require central direction. Markets, institutions, media systems, algorithms, and audiences can collectively produce rehearsal without a single planner.

This is what distinguishes societal drill from propaganda.

Propaganda asks what someone tried to make people believe.

Societal drill asks what people have already practiced recognizing.

That question is broader, and in some cases more important.

The final question therefore remains:

What future are we practicing for?

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Historical Context

The Tet Offensive, January–September 1968, forms the principal historical counterpoint used in this paper. The argument does not depend on the claim that contemporary entertainment caused support for, opposition to, or participation in the Vietnam War. Rather, the juxtaposition illustrates the broader concept developed here: fictional and mediated environments may provide symbolic structures through which real events later become recognizable, interpretable, and emotionally legible.

The paper therefore treats the relationship among entertainment, institutions, propaganda, psychological operations, and historical behavior as an empirical question rather than assuming equivalence among them. Its central distinction remains intact: **societal rehearsal can occur without deliberate psychological operation, while deliberate psychological operations may employ societal rehearsal as one of their mechanisms.**

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U.S.S. ENTERPRISE
NCC-1701
THE SOCIETAL DRILL
CULTURAL REHEARSAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS, AND THE PRECONDITIONING OF FUTURE REALITY
Douglas C. Youvan
"Space... the final frontier..."
SAIGON
CHOLON
TET OFFENSIVE 1968
FIGHT FOR FREEDOM
STAR TREK
From the bridge of the Enterprise to the streets of Saigon – fiction can rehearse the real decisions of history.